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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DAKAR 000426

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STATE FOR S/S-O, S/S-S, AF, AF/W, AF/RSA, DRL/AE AND INR/AA  
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SUBJECT: SENEGAL: ELECTION SITREP 1, 13:50 GMT

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Senegal's 4.9 million registered voters appear to be voting in large numbers today in what most see as a referendum on President Abdoulaye Wade's seven years in office. The voters roll is twice as large as the 2000 list and includes many youth who had hoped Wade would create more jobs. Initial reports indicate that turnout is high and voters are largely able to cast their ballots freely, but organizational problems are slowing the voting process. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Turnout appears high at most polling stations. Observers report voters waiting patiently in long lines beginning well before 8 :00 a.m., and it is likely that not all voters will be able to vote before the polls officially close at 6 :00 p.m. At least two local prefects have stated they have been authorized to remain open as late as 8 :00 p.m. if voters are still in line.

¶3. (U) Many polls opened late, but most voting stations were operational by 9 :00 a.m., one hour after the official opening of polls. In some cases, the delay was caused by missing materials, such as the "a vote" (has voted) stamp.

¶4. (U) Overall, the voting environment is neutral : observers have reported isolated instances of propaganda or visible campaign material (less than one percent of observed polling stations) and no overt attempt to intimidate voters. In one rural Casamance village, a woman wearing a uniform identifying her as an employee of the Ministry of Women served breakfast to poll workers and voters in two voting rooms. In some other cases, party representatives were seen to assist voters in casting their votes, but this practice was not widespread and is authorized under the electoral code.

¶5. (U) Voting has moved very slowly. To some degree, this can be attributed to voters unfamiliar with the voting process. In some cases, observers reported elderly voters leaving the voting booths with empty hands, having thrown their ballots into the trash boxes in the voting booths rather than depositing them into the ballot boxes outside the voting booths.

¶6. (SBU) Poor organization, however, rather than voter error, is the primary cause of the slow pace of voting. Most delays in poll opening can be attributed to lack of preparation and organization by the electoral commission. Lines of voters remained long and grew throughout the morning. Observers reported that even at the same polling location (lieu de vote), different polling booths (bureaux de vote) were organized and run differently, with widely varying degrees of efficiency.

¶7. (SBU) Many poll workers are unclear on their responsibilities. In at least three cases, poll officials asked or allowed political party representatives to assist voters in voting. In another case, the election commission representative did not have his copy of the voter registration rolls, which voters sign after they vote. The signed exit rolls can then be checked against the entry rolls which the voter signs as s/he enters the polling office. The poll worker stated it was too much work to have each voter sign the rolls twice,

and said "They will copy the book for me later," missing the point that having two separate rolls helps to ensure the integrity of the process.

¶18. (U) The overall security environment is calm. Most businesses and restaurants are closed; and there is no/no evidence of increased police and gendarme presence on the streets of Dakar or in the vicinity of polling stations.

¶19. (U) On February 23, Minister of Interior and Local Government Ousmane Ngom told representatives of the 2,500 Senegalese and international observers that the Government was ready for a "free, fair and transparent election." He noted the entire voters roll is on the Internet. Each of the 12,000 plus polling places is identified on maps that are available to citizens and observers, and the security force ballots have been safeguarded since approximately 19,000 of the possible 23,000 cast their ballots on February 17 and ¶18. Over 90 percent of registered voters have picked up their new biometric voter and national identity cards, which cost USD 40 million. The Government hopes that another five percent will retrieve their cards at polling stations today. In response to a question about pre-campaign election activities, Ngom reiterated that the Government had authorized 69 percent of demonstrations and marches for a total of 132.

¶10. (U) Ngom also assured the observers that there would be no fictional polling stations. Approximately 2,000 Senegalese observers are monitoring the election, and approximately 500 international observers are on the ground. In addition to the 52 U.S. mission observers who are working in 14 teams, the International Observatory for Democracy has sent 166 observers led by the Chairman of Burkina Faso's independent election commission. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has fielded 60 observers. Moreover, "la Francophonie," the African Union (AU), the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA or WAEMU), the

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Organization of the Islamic Conferences (OIC), and various national delegations from Europe are observing.

JACOBS